

Report Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor

■ 1.0 Site Description

The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor is a special type of national park. It is a region of nearly 400,000 acres located within Worcester County in central Massachusetts and Providence County in northern Rhode Island. The National Corridor was designated by Congress in 1986 to preserve and interpret for present and future generations the unique and significant value of the Blackstone Valley. It includes cities, towns, villages and almost one million people. The Federal government does not own or manage any of the land or resources in the corridor as it does in the more traditional national parks. Instead the NPS, two state governments, dozens of local municipalities, businesses, nonprofit historical & environmental organizations, educational institutions, many private citizens, and a unifying commission work together in partnerships to protect the Valley's special identity and prepare for its future.

The Blackstone River Valley illustrates a major revolution in America's past: the Age of Industry. Evidence of the way people lived during this turning point in history can still be seen in the valley's villages, farms, cities and riverways – in a working landscape between Worcester, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island. In 1790, American craftsmen built the first machines that successfully used waterpower to spin cotton. America's first factory, Slater Mill, was built on the banks of the Blackstone River in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

The corridor is situated in 24 cities and towns. Visitor centers are provided in Pawtucket and Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and in Uxbridge, Massachusetts and Quinsigamond Village in the City of Worcester, Massachusetts. The park headquarters is in Woonsocket. The unifying link among these sites is the Blackstone River, which served as a major *transportation* route from the inland port in Worcester to the port in Providence in the latter part of the 19th Century and is now emerging as a important regional recreational resource. Prior to the introduction of train service, the Blackstone Canal facilitated shipping between Worcester and Providence. At present, the rail line is used for freight, but planners are revisiting the possibility of restoring passenger rail service. In Worcester, Union Station has reopened after an extensive renovation and there is now train service between Worcester and Boston.

Another new transportation link is the improvement made to Route 146, the principal north-south highway connecting Providence and Worcester. A new connection to Interstate 90 (Massachusetts Turnpike) was completed recently, and demand for access to

commuter rail stations in neighboring Grafton and Millbury has increased with the introduction of train service and improved regional highway access.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

There are several systems currently in place within the corridor. The Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) operates bus service in Providence, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket. In Pawtucket, RIPTA's intermodal center is located adjacent to the Slater Mill and the Blackstone River. This center was built by a partnership with the City of Pawtucket, RIPTA, the Heritage Corridor, and the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce.

There is a ferry service that operates between Pawtucket and Providence for commuters providing a 35-minute trip to Downtown Providence, where a large number of office jobs are located. This service was funded with a Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) grant and will require additional resources to continue to operate.

In Woonsocket, RIPTA bus service includes service between Providence and Woonsocket as well as to the site of the Corridor Commission Office and Visitor Center (Route 86).

In Worcester, local bus service is operated by the Worcester Regional Transit Authority and the Quinsigamond Village area is served by Route 4, Millbury City Line, which connects with the Downtown area. At present, there is no intercity bus service between Worcester and Providence.

In addition to the transit routes, the Blackstone River Valley Corridor is being developed for bicycle transportation in several segments along the corridor. The first 3.5-mile segment of the Blackstone River Bikeway opened in October 1998. This new multi-use path follows the Blackstone River, and is being constructed in eight contract segments (totaling 17 miles) from Pawtucket to the Massachusetts State Line. There it will eventually join a Massachusetts path that will continue to follow the Blackstone River to Worcester.

Finally, with increased recreational use of the corridor, interest in canoeing has also increased. The most requested brochure offered in the corridor is the canoeing guide. To meet this demand, commission staff are actively developing river access points.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

Given the extensive length of the corridor (more than 45 miles) and the extensive coverage area, the types of Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) needs that are appropriate for this corridor differ from other NPS facilities. For example, the corridor could benefit from the development of an intermodal transportation plan that covers the entire corridor. At individual locations, strategies to advance the implementation of bikeway projects and enhanced river access (including launches and parking areas for both bicycles and cars)

are needed. For canoeing to be truly successful, the provision of services to shuttle canoeists back to their cars at the end of their trip would also be beneficial. Consideration should be given to restoring intercity bus or train service between Providence and Worcester so that a visitor without a car could see the portions of the corridor located in Worcester. In Pawtucket, additional resources are needed to expand the parking facility at the intermodal center. One estimate for parking expansion was \$1.4 million.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

The potential for increased utilization of ATS primarily for recreational purposes appears to be significant. Use of the existing multi-use trails is high and can lead to weekend crowding. Demand for canoeing is increasing. While the Cities of Providence, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket are all accessible by bus, as is Worcester (internally), the services that are in place today could be enhanced to better link the corridor facilities. Further, the sites that are either outside of urban areas or in between them are under-served by transit. Given the rich transportation heritage of the corridor, the development of an intermodal transportation plan is suggested.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Rhode Island Department of Transportation Web site:
<http://www.dot.state.ri.us/WebModal/bikeri.html>.

National Park Service Web site: <http://www.nps.gov/blac.htm>.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

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